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NBC News on the defensive

Grossman denies Abbas interview aided terrorism

HOLLYWOOD—These are troubled times for NBC News, despite healthy ratings. There's the controversial appearance once again of terrorist Abul Abbas on last night's "1986." There's also the William Casey request to the Justice Department to explore whether NBC should be prosecuted for the "Today" report by Jim Polk on the espionage trial of Ronald Pelton, who was convicted of selling American intelligence secrets to the Soviet Union.

In a news conference held before a gathering of television critics in Los Angeles, Lawrence K. Grossman, NBC News president, addressed these issues and more.

Grossman was defensive about giving terrorist Abul Abbas a public platform on last night's edition of "1986," which re-examined the Achille Lauro hijacking. Portions of the interview with Abbas had been aired previously on the "NBC Evening News" and "Today," sparking enormous controversy.

Grossman said, "NBC is neither a national intelligence service nor a law enforcement agency. We do not have the authority or the ability to arrest fugitives."

He claimed the State Department knew where Abbas was at the time the Justice Department was seeking information from NBC as to his whereabouts. (A condition of the interview was to keep his location secret.)

"Agreeing not to reveal the location of an interview is hardly

without precedent in the news business," declared Grossman.

Grossman also responded to William Casey's public pronouncement that he had asked the Justice Department to look into the Jim Polk report about "Ivy Bells," the U.S. intelligence project revealed to the Russians by Ronald Pelton, who was later tried and convicted. Casey believes United States security was compromised by the report.

"We are certainly aware of the dilemma of our government," said Grossman. "But when the

information is a matter of public record and has been widely reported previously with no protest from authorities—as happened with the Polk report—then you wonder what is really behind the press bashing."

He added, "The information was reported last November on 'NBC Nightly News' and we heard

not a word from him (William Casey) then."

Grossman also revealed that NBC News issued a new contract to "Today" co-host Jane Pauley (her old contract would have been up in two years), and also signed a new long-term deal with Bryant Gumbel.

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